

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:05] DC: It takes the right skills and the right innovation to design and manage meaningful print marketing solutions. Welcome to Podcasts From the Printerverse, where we explore all facets of print and marketing that create stellar communications and sales opportunities for business success. I'm your host, Deborah Corn, the Intergalactic Ambassador to the Printerverse. Thanks for tuning in. Listen long and prosper.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:31] DC: Hey, everybody. Welcome to Podcasts From the Printerverse. This is Deborah Corn, your Intergalactic Ambassador. Today, we have Tobias Degsell. He is the founder of Combiner, a Stockholm-based company focused on bringing people ideas and perspectives together. Through Combiner, he works with organizations around the world to explore how people collaborate, share knowledge and work together around complex ideas. Fun fact, Tobias is also the former curator at the Nobel Prize Museum in Stockholm. I am so happy and honored to call you friend. Hello Tobias.

[0:01:13] TD: Hi, Deborah. Excellent. It's a long time.

[0:01:16] DC: It's been too long. But I follow you on LinkedIn. I see all the amazing work you're doing, helping people build bridges, which is what you do, and it's just so amazing, everything that you do out in the world. Let's share that with people. For anyone who might be new to your work, or you, although I do speak about you often, how do you describe what you do through Combiner and what are you exploring right now?

[0:01:46] TD: Well, Combiner does a couple of things. I do approximately four presentations, or keynotes, presentations every month. I never do three, I never do five. I'm quite a rigid in the way of how I do things. When I'm not doing inspirational keynotes, I actually go into organizations and companies, and I help them to push the innovation envelope in order to how to do things and think in different ways. Because we get so stuck in old patterns, and sometimes we need to break those patterns in order to push the envelope.

[0:02:20] DC: What are the patterns you see most often repeating themselves in corporations?

[0:02:25] TD: Well, right now, I see that a lot of companies, they are really focused on the short-term perspective. They are not sure on how to handle this new world of uncertainty. They are just keeping their fingers crossed and hope everything will go back. I tell them that, well, it will not. It's about actually challenging the system, developing something new, because some of the things that we did before, they were never working, so let's kill those things. Let's move forward and focus on the right things to do.

[0:02:58] DC: It's one thing to help an organization build processes that you can show a chart for and say, this is why this has to go here and this goes there. But if you're trying to change the way people think about things, which is often tied to how they feel about things, seems like it could be a bit of a challenge.

[0:03:19] TD: Well, the funny thing is that if you want to create some kind of success or excellence that I'm striving for, it's all about the people. The problem is, I've been realizing, it's about the people, but the people also need some kind of system to hold on to. Because if you just push people, you get those passionate people that are doing a massive thing. By the way, I don't like the word passion. I prefer the word, actually, obsession, because I never understood the word the passion. For me, it's about being very obsessed and really want to do something about it. The problem is if you build it just upon people, it becomes automatically short-term, because no one will live forever. People will retire, or they will die, or they will quit, or whatever. You need to build the system based upon people, but also a system for the people to hold on to.

Most of the systems that we have today in society, they are designed by engineer, or mathematician, or business people. I love those people, but I have a little bit of a different background. My major at the university was Scandinavian languages. I was quite nervous. I was analyzing names of different plants in old Swedish dialects. I was counting how many of the words are ending with ER, OR, capital S, etc. I build those magnificent systems until the university kicked me out. The thing is that due to inner language is there is a right and wrong in language, but the language is actually changed over time. You're not speaking the same way you did today as you did 100 to 100 years ago. There is a right and wrong in a language, but it's designed to develop.

It's much more human-based. It has this flexibility. What we need, as I see it in the future, we need the systems, but the systems sometimes need to be a little bit more flexible, because the systems that we are using today are too hard on the human. That's why the old system needs to be replaced.

[0:05:26] DC: It's so interesting, because people get in their comfort zones of this is the way it is. This is the route I drive to work. This is the time I get my coffee. This is the red light I always get stuck at. To make a significant change, they have to make a change. It's something you taught me that I repeat to everybody is you never say, we're going to make a change. You say, we're going to make improvements around. Because everybody loves to make improvements. Nobody wants to make a change. Do you find that that is still true?

[0:05:56] TD: It's still true. You can have a discussion about that. The thing about change, which is a quite interesting word, is you meet some people, and some people will ask. They will say, "Oh, I love changes." Some people say, "I hate changes." I say, this is not about love and hate. Because none of us can stop time. Change will happen if we like it or not. It's about how do we adapt to change? That's the big question that we all need to speak about. When we speak about how we adapt to change, I think we should connect it to what type of change do we want to be part of? Isn't it improvement instead?

It's about getting people on board, because if we get this love and hate situation, then you will have some people that are running really fast, and some people who are not running – are running at all. Then you create a society that is not working. You need people to join this movement of that we need to move forward even if we don't like it. It's all about making improvements, leaving the world in a better shape than it was when we just enter it.

[0:07:04] DC: You mentioned obsession, and on your website, very prominent is the word obsession in yellow. Underneath that, it says, "That's our motto, and it can be yours, too." Why is that your motto? What are you currently obsessed with? Is it Taylor Swift? Is it Taylor Swift? Is it Taylor Swift?

[0:07:22] TD: It's not Taylor Swift, actually. But the only thing is that I meet so many organizations and companies, and almost all of them speak about this passion thing. Then I

started to be a little bit annoyed with that. Because first of all, I never understood the word passion. I think that you need something that is much stronger. Because if you want to really drive development to create excellence, or create improvement, that is really, really fantastic. It can't just be about allowing it to be passionate about it. It's about through obsession. You need people that are almost obsessed with something, because you need to have people that will do the work, and they'd forget about the minutes and hours and days and years, because they are really into this one.

The problem with obsession is, I often argue that I believe obsession is very powerful, but you need to do it together with others. Because sometimes if you are this type of an obsessed person, you can jump into this rabbit hole, and you will never come out of it. You need friends, or allies that you trust, that sometimes can come and pull you in the air and put you in another rabbit hole.

If we want to create something that is going to be better, we will need people that are really into doing the hard work that is needed. That's why obsession is so much better than passion. I think that it's something that we all know. We have met those people that were almost crazy. They were obsessed with something. You want to be around those people because those are the people that actually make things happen. What I'm obsessed with right now is it's the same thing that I'm being obsessed with for so long. I'm, of course, obsessed with words. That was my first obsession. Then my obsession has shifted over the time. When I worked at the Nobel Prize Museum, I was obsessed with the Nobel Prize stories. I'm still a little obsessed with them, not as much. What I'm obsessed with right now is on how to create a system that allows people together, push the envelope.

It's about creating a system that is pushing people towards. It's not about what's in it for me. It's what's in it for us. Of course, it can't be once in it for us all the time, so it's a balance between doing things where you need, this is quite beneficial for me as a person. But if we create a society, a world where it's all about what's in it for me, I don't want to live in a world like that. I prefer to live in a world where more people also have the ability to think what's in it for us. Going back to the Nobel Prize Laureates' idea about, this is not a traditional competition with winners and losers. It's about pushing the envelope, creating about the world, making more people than yourself a winner. That's a big shift from the old system, which was always based

upon competition, and someone was winning the game, and some people were the winners, and a lot of people were the losers. I hate that idea. I think that we can create a system where we allow people, a majority, almost everyone to become a winner.

[0:10:47] DC: I mean, the goal is actually for everybody to work together for the great or good, whether or not it has any benefits for you at all. Because eventually, something will. It might not be everything, like you said, but I love that.

[0:11:00] TD: It's so easy to say that if you're like, for example, if you don't have money to buy food, of course, you need to think about yourself, and you shouldn't feel bad about that, because it's about surviving also. It's about balancing what's in it for me and what's in it for us. Today, we live in a society where we have focused too much on what's in it for me. We have focused on the short-term perspective. That is not going to help us solving those really, really complicated and complex matters that we need to solve, because in order to solve them, we need long-term thinking and we need to stress the importance of humanity and what's in it for us.

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[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:12:37] DC: You mentioned you studied the Nobel Prize Laureates up close. We've had conversations about this. Really, the first time I heard you speak, you actually spoke about this.

When you look across the teams behind those amazing achievements, what characteristics consistently show up, and are they repeatable?

[0:12:59] TD: That's so interesting, because that was something that I thought quite early in my time at the museum, but also the reason where I decided to leave the museum, because the thing that connects Nobel prize laureates is that they have the ability to think, but also the ability to act in different ways. It's creativity, or innovation. It's not just about thinking differently. Everyone can think different. It's not rocket science. But it's about ability to think different, or executing those different ideas, and to execute new and different things. That's the tricky part.

What the Nobel Prize Laureates has understood is this is not a one-man or one-woman show. This is not about me doing it, and everyone else is stupid. It's about working together. It's about collaboration. It's about bringing people together that share the same, probably obsession. It's also about understanding that if you bring people together that are too much alike yourself, we will end up in this trap of thinking, and like great minds think alike. We don't want to create a situation where we all think alike. It's about bringing different perspectives to the table.

You need collaboration as this base, but you need to spice collaboration with diversity, which is apparently a very controversial word, that someone say, you can't use that word anymore. I think, are you stupid? Because then, you have misunderstood what it's all about. Because sometimes people think this is just about gender, or this is just about where you were born on the planet Earth. It's about skin color, or what you have, or not have between your legs. I said, that's quite silly, because then you are giving the word in what you can see with your eyes. There are so many things that we can't see with our eyes inside people's brains. How are they working? If people have some kind of illness, or some history that they don't want to share, but that situation or that are affecting their lives a lot and making them make different ways of thinking.

For me, it's about diversity of thoughts, collaboration based upon people that has different backgrounds coming together. If you want to make this mix together, which is quite tough, because it's so easy to speak about it once again. Every ideas are easy, and theories are easy. But the execution is hard, because if you want to execute those ideas, you need trust. That's one of the biggest challenges we have today, that we are living in a world where no one is

trusting each other anymore. If we are not trusting each other, then collaboration and especially collaborating with people that are a little bit different myself, will be very, very hard to achieve. Almost impossible.

It's almost like going back to the basic mindset of the Nobel Prize Laureates, basic culture about collaboration. This is not a one-man or one-woman show. We need diversity because in order to solve complicated and complex things, we need to see the problem from different perspectives. It's about the process. You will fail and do so many mistakes. But we trust the process, and we trust the people. We trust that we will eventually find the correct solution.

[0:16:29] DC: I was once at a conference, and Amazon was there speaking about A-L-E-X-A, which I can't say, because it's next to me. It was perhaps the most interesting thing I had ever heard. It reflects upon, it's going to echo what you just said. They got up there, and they were talking about how they were developing it. You might think, "Well, we're in America. It's just going to speak English." Okay, fine. No problem. It does speak English in America. But is the person asking for a hamburger, or burger, or a meat patty, do they have some sort of speech impediment? Are they maybe hearing impaired? So, they might speak a little differently. Are they speaking English as a second language with an accent?

They had people come in to speak the way they speak. The devices could recognize alternative ways that people might ask for something or say something, so nobody was left out.

[0:17:37] TD: Yeah. Because it's about bringing people together. That's definitely what goes up with this.

[0:17:41] DC: What I'm saying is these were engineers. They're like, "Okay, we can't just program this thing to understand someone who might speak like me," although a lot of people say I have a pretty heavy New York accent. By the way, sometimes it doesn't understand me, and I have to say it very slowly, like, "Where is the car wash?" Which is a very hard one for me, see? Car washes, I was saying. It's like, what? Doesn't understand me. Yeah, but if you're speaking English with a Swedish accent. Although I don't think it knows where Lutfisk is. Is that what that is?

[0:18:15] TD: Lutfisk. No, no, no. Probably not.

[0:18:17] DC: I hope not. Okay. Looking at history through the lens of human behavior and not politics, societies move in long cycles. It's about 50 or 60 years, about 50 years if you look back in history. Systems, they eventually fracture, or reset, or there's some event horizon, and things change. I believe we're in one of these cycles now. Hopefully, we're at the coming out at the end of it. What would you rebuild first to help people come back together and work toward the common good as we said before? But understanding that everyone won't ever agree with everything?

[0:19:02] TD: No. But the thing about that, as you say, the systems are changing, and they have always been changing, but now they are changing so fast, and so rapidly due to technology, but also due to science. The progress has been amazing. The problem is it has also driven people apart. Then, we need to find something that is stable and it's almost eternal. That's something that I've been into for many, many years, finding out, what are those basic parts that we can all come together agreeing on that these are important? If you speak to, for example, organizations, they often say that we believe that we need development, or we need improvements. Yes. But how do you get them? Then people say, oh, it's all about resources.

I say, no, no, no. It can't be resources. Because when people get resources, or organizations get resources, they tend to use the resources in very old-fashioned, traditional ways. They often say, "We don't have the money. We don't have the time. Please, give us money and time." Then, when you give people money and time, they take that money and time and go back and do it in a very traditional way, because they want it to be comfortable and nice. I sometimes say that I think that innovation is not a popularity contest. It's not about making people happy in the short term. It's about doing things in the long term.

Then you need to do exactly what are those crucial elements that we can agree on are super important. Today, some people have been starting discussing this discussion about competence, that we need competence. Yeah, that is partly correct. The problem with competence is you can bring so many smart and competent people, but if they don't agree or they disagree on everything, they will not manage to do anything. I think it's about competence, but it's also about engagement. It's not about what do I care about. It's about what do we care

about? What do we think is of this very big importance? It's probably so important that we probably do it for free, but we will not tell anyone. This is something that we really want to dive into, because when we can find those areas that we think we need to fix, this one, and we all agree on that one, then the logical question will be, yes, this is what we want to do. Do we have the competence to do it? Or do we need to add something? Because I strongly believe it's engagement, plus competence, that drives development.

It's like almost a circle training class that you will never ever finish. You can't be engaged all the time, every day. Competence that shifts over time. It's about life. It's about what you learn in life. It's about what you learn in work. It's about education, so many things. It's a very flexible thing. Also, development. You will never finish this one. It's about creating a system where we agree on that what we need, and we will always need that, because this is not only in 2025 or 26. I would argue, if we go 100 years ahead, I truly believe that engagement will still be as important. I strongly believe that it will be about competence in the future, also, because it has always been like that. It will be about development. That is something that we can all come together, finding those things that we have in common, instead of focusing on all those things that are different.

Human beings, we are so good in finding those things that we are different, we come from different countries, we have different religions, we have different history, so whatever. Yeah, differences could be nice, but let's sometimes also speak about the similarities, because the similarities is what makes things to come together. I think it doesn't matter if you have a suite in the United States or wherever, it will be about those core elements that are super important if you want to do great stuff.

For me, it's about designing this triangle where you have edgy parts, you have engagement, you have competence, and you have development. This is the first step for me, because in that triangle, we can speak. Yeah, if we do this together, we will learn. It's fun to work with engaged people, and we will develop and find nice things. It could focus partly on what's in it for me. You actually, if you explain it quite nice, people get this triangle. The second triangle is about excellence. In that, to your place, development with excellence. The only difference is that in the first triangle, it could be about what's in it for me. In the second triangle, you get what's in it for us.

[0:24:11] DC: I could argue with you, like, who decides what competence is? Who decides what? Who's making these judgments about who's intelligent and all that other stuff? But we're going to put that to the side for a second.

[0:24:22] TD: Yeah. Actually, the workshop with a carpenter about that. It was quite interesting, because so many people in that industry, they didn't go to universities, I think they are stupid. It's not about going to university. It's about this is about work experience. This is about life experience. This is about college. Sometimes you need people that went to university, but they are not the right. You use those people as keys to lock up the project. They don't have a clue how to do it, because you need someone that has this amazing long-term work experience, who can do it, or someone who has been to another country, or see something else. Competence is not exclusive; it's inclusive. Because everyone has competence. We need to open our view on how we see competence. It's because that is what people bring to the table. Sometimes it's a college degree. Sometimes it's that they had some kind of – one of the carpenters told me, we have this work too much, so he got burned out. Then he said, when he came back to work, he claimed that he were quite observant.

When he looked upon his colleagues, he could see that if some of his friends or colleagues were close to getting burned out. That is not something you can study at university or have a degree in. That is something that you learn from having this experience.

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[0:25:53] DC: Girls Who Print provides women in print and graphic communications with information resources, events, and mentorship to help them navigate their careers and the industry. As the largest independent network of women in print and a nonprofit organization, our global mission to provide resources, skill-building, education, and support for women to lead, inspire, and empower has never been stronger or more accessible. Through our member platform and program, as well as regional groups forming around the world, your access to Girls Who Print is just a click away. Gentlemen, you are most welcome to join us as allies. Get involved and get empowered today. Link in the show notes.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:26:40] DC: When I was writing this question for you, I was thinking about what would my answer be? My answer would be truth. I don't know how we have veered from two plus two equals four, but somehow, we have. I'd like to know, how do we get that back? How do we get everybody back on at least the foundational things of what is real and what is not real when there is so much disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation, is that the other one that they – out in the world? How do we get control of that again, Tobias?

[0:27:17] TD: It's a tough one, because it's also tied back to this rapid change. Yeah, I'm a big fan of science. Of course. But the problem is in science, it's also shifting, because we learn new things, so it's not stable. Since we learn a lot of new things, which is great, then people say, but well, then it can't be science, because they have this idea about science being just one thing. Yes, some of the things are quite obvious, like one plus one equals two. That is something that I think we need to find a way that people can disagree on, because you can't disagree on those basic things. We need to use almost a scientific method on how we do things. That's why I think, instead of – for example, circle. One of the problems today is that there is a lack of truth.

We find a group of people that says, “Yeah, we agree. This is a problem. This is something that we are really annoyed about, and we need to solve it.” Then you circle, that's the engagement part. You find people that actually want to do something about it. Once you have found those group of people that we want, this is a problem that we would like to try to solve, then the logical question is, how do we tackle that problem? Because there is probably not one way to do it. There's a couple of ways to do that one. Then you try to do something about it. This can't just be about us sitting down having discussions all the time. It's about actually having discussions, but also at the same time, getting our hands dirty.

I did the presentation at MIT in Boston. I think it was two years ago. They told me quite an interesting detail, because they have this inefficient motto at MIT, where they speak about the mind and the hand. Because we don't want just researchers sitting on an ivory tower. They need to have a brain, but everyone has a brain. Those researchers also need to get their hands dirty. This is from the beginning, like an engineering school. They apply this mind and hand methodology. I think that it's quite nice. This is something that we will need to apply; that yes, we need to use our brains, but we also need to get our hands dirty.

The problem today is not about finding people with brains. It's about finding people that really want to get their hands dirty. Because somehow, we have this idea about so smart and excellent to sit down and think and have the brain, and someone else will do the hard work. Well, the hard work is also competence, that's also expertise. It's about bringing those things together.

[0:30:01] DC: I consider you human artificial intelligence, which might sound weird, but I know that when we have spoken before, you told me that when you were studying the Nobel laureates, you would just read about them and then make calculations in your head, which you probably could do right now. How do you feel about AI? I just asked you an emotion question, Tobias. I don't know if your head is going to explode.

[0:30:27] TD: Beautiful question. I think it's setting. Super interesting. Last year, they awarded the Nobel Prize in physics to the people who actually came up with AI, or, actually, machine learning. The physics prize went to an AI, and also, the chemistry prize last year went to people using AI for predicting protein structure, etc. If the Nobel committees have decided that AI is of high relevance and has been awarded, you can't say that this will not be of importance. It's going to be super important. As I see it, it's technology, and technology is a sword, or it's a tool. It's on how do we use AI? How do we use it for the benefit of humanity?

This is very important, because today you see people that in the future, AI will do everything and we don't need to do anything, because AI will do everything for us. I believe that is incorrect. The future is never just about one thing. It's AI plus a couple of things. As I use it personally, I use AI as an assistant or a sparring partner in order to help me see things from different perspectives. Almost the same thing I do with friends. But the good thing about AI is I can do it whenever I want to. Some of the questions, the good thing about AI, you can terrorize AI for a very long time, that you don't want to do with friends sometimes. It's a compliment, about actually exploring AI and see what can we do with it, because it has this great potential, but it has to be combined with human skills.

[0:32:11] DC: I like how you said, sometimes you don't want to torture your friends.

[0:32:15] TD: No, no, no, no.

[0:32:15] DC: I like the disclaimer. No, I just like to keep it. All right, here's a weird question about AI, because why not? Reading all the time, listening all the time about these data centers and the electricity, and what is going to happen with all of that. Any commentary? We're going to start building nuclear reactors around here to power these things?

[0:32:37] TD: The thing is that we need to have a discussion about this is that AI is a reality, and how should we use AI for the good of everyone? Of course, because AI is not for free, it will cost – it needs a lot of electricity. I hope that it doesn't just – that AI is used for something good. It's not only used for gaming or whatever. That's the problem today. It's almost like change. We have a situation where people say, “Oh, I love AI and I love technology.” Other people say, “I hate it.” This is not about love and hate once again. This is about how do we adapt to change? How do we adapt to technology? Once we have it, we can't stop it. It's about understanding that we need to have a discussion about AI, and we need to have it quite quickly, because the progress is moving really, really fast.

Then you see people in China developing stuff, and you see people in the United States developing stuff, and they're trying to do some stuff in Europe also. I think that we somehow need to come together and have a discussion about what's in it for us, instead of having a discussion about what's in it for me. Because we are still in this very short-term perspective. It's about moving into a long-term perspective.

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[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:34:37] DC: Speaking of which, I mentioned before that the world operates on a 50-ish year cycle through history. At least that's how I see it. If you were asked to place one idea in a time capsule to be opened 50 years from now, what would it be and why?

[0:34:59] TD: One idea. The thing is that I would argue that yes, you speak about 50-year cycles. I think that speed is going to be quite much shorter due to the fact of science and technology. What I would like to emphasize, and I think I've been speaking about and almost obsessing about it, but if I would like to put something in a time capsule and that is of great importance, it will be about collaboration. It will be collaborative, because I'm a little bit scared that we forget about it. We're continuing in this short-term competitive way, because we have this idea about it's a one-man, a one-woman show, it's about competition, it's about winning. It was never about winning. It was about us from the beginning.

This is something that is quite good to be reminded on even in 50 years, when they opened the capsule. They was, "Yes, we understood that." It was like, that was not necessary, but I think that it's going to be super crucial. We need to create something based upon collaboration instead.

[0:36:10] DC: Well, I am officially still obsessed with you. I will continue stalking you on LinkedIn and looking at all the amazing photographs you take of bridges, because that's what you do. You help people build bridges from all around the world. I just want to thank you so much for your time today and for jumping on a podcast with me. I really appreciate it.

[0:36:34] TD: Appreciate about the bridges. This is also very important before we end that, yes, the future is about bridges, but it's not about building bridges randomly. It's not about in the 70s, everyone sitting around in a rain holding hand singing songs. It's not about, you need to understand what are those crucial and very important islands and how do we connect them? Because we have been, as human beings, quite good in building those specific islands, those specific areas, but we have been really, really bad in putting them together.

When you have those islands, and you pour humans on top of this one, sometimes people fall in between, and then it's unclear who is responsible. It's about establishing what are those key elements, those islands, that are of great importance, and how do we connect them? All mind is

like, it's never about one thing. It can't be about AI. What are those other things that we need to connect with AI? It's never just about one thing. It's never about engagement. It's about engagement, plus competence and development.

It's tricky, because we as human beings, we want to have one person, or one thing. What is the silver bullet? It's not a one silver bullet. It's a couple of things. If you start playing around with too many things, you create chaos. It's about actually deciding what do we need to prioritize. That's why those bridges are so important, because we have come to a situation in the world where we need to start having a discussion about we need to prioritize some of the things right now. How do we put and push things together?

In a war, the first thing that they blow up in wars are bridges. Of course, not everyone likes this. Some people, they want to sit on their islands, and they want this competitive world to continue. I'm not against competition, but I think when everything is all about competition, then I get annoyed. For me, competition that's playfulness. Sometimes it's nice to play and compete. But the endgame is not the competition. The endgame is about creating a better world. How do we do it together? Because it's about togetherness, collaboration, and it's about creating something that is excellent for future generations.

[0:39:04] DC: Everything you need to connect with Tobias is in the show notes, including his Instagram. Until next time, obsess long, everybody, and prosper.

[END OF EPISODE]

[0:39:15] DC: Thanks for listening to Podcasts From the Printerverse. Please subscribe, click some stars, and leave us a review. Connect with us through printmediacentr.com, we'd love to hear your feedback on our shows and topics that are of interest for future broadcasts. Until next time, thanks for joining us. Print long and prosper.

[END]

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